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U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT
1 August 1983

The Showdown Over CIA's "Dirty Tricks"

Even if the "secret war" in Nicaragua is endorsed by Congress, debate over covert action will not end.

The uproar in Congress over Central Intelligence Agency support for Nicaragua's anti-Sandinista rebels is the storm front of a bigger controversy about covert U.S. actions worldwide.

The broad issue at stake in the battle, which was headed for a showdown in Congress in late July, is this: Is it moral or even feasible for the United States, with its open society, to employ "dirty tricks" to promote its foreign policy?

At a rare closed session of the House of Representatives on July 19, administration critics used the moral argument in calling for a cutoff of funds to 10,000 or more rebels in Nicaragua.

That argument is summed up by Representative Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) with the claim that the "secret war" in Nicaragua "undercuts the U.S. image in the world as a nation that acts legally, fairly, decently and overtly."

Aid held vital. White House officials insist that help for the anti-Sandinista guerrillas is vital to stop the flow of military supplies from Nicaragua's Marxist government to leftist guerrilla forces in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America.

The controversy is shaping up as a major test not only for Reagan's Central American policy but also for his plan to rehabilitate covert action as a key element in U.S. overseas strategy. In this, he has reversed a policy initiated during the Ford and Carter administrations that virtually dismantled the CIA's department of "dirty tricks."

The action by Presidents Ford and Carter stemmed from disclosures in 1974 and 1975 that CIA clandestine operations had included spying on Americans—such as in illegally opening mail and penetrating antiwar organizations—and plotting to assassinate several hostile foreign leaders.

Rebuilding. Over the past 30 months, William Casey, Reagan's CIA director, has given high priority to rebuilding the agency's capability to conduct covert operations. The administration has left little doubt that it sees such actions as essential and legitimate weapons in America's arsenal.

Now, that policy is facing its stiffest challenge from the congressional revolt against supporting anti-Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua. Why has the operation triggered such a reaction?

One reason is widespread concern about the danger that the U.S. will be drawn into a shooting war in Central Ame
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Congress, too, now subjects covert activity to close monitoring—a duty it took on formally after the scandals that broke in the mid-1970s.

Other operations. Intelligence specialists point out that, while the Nicaraguan project is under attack, other covert operations have come to light without provoking a negative reaction. A notable example is CIA support for anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan.

"Nobody is raising a finger to that," observes former CIA Director Stansfield Turner, "because we'd be glad if Afghan freedom fighters take over their government."

Still, there is a faction of lawmakers that is challenging not only the Nicaraguan action but also, on principle, the morality of American covert operations. Critics such as Representative Jim Leach (R-Iowa) say these actions make hypocrisy of democratic law and lower the United States "down into the gutter of Communist-type behavior."

Aside from moral considerations, critics claim that covert actions have proved counterproductive, leaving a legacy of bitterness against the U.S. in many parts of the world. They attribute

CIA-backed Nicaraguan rebels are at the heart of the covert-action controversy.

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